

beneath the Indiana sky by Naladot

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Summary: "Everyone thinks Barb is just missing and nothing is ever resolved and no one understands that Barb's absence is a gaping hole in the fabric of the universe. People forget." Nancy tries to cope. Set between Season 1 and 2. Some Nancy/Steve and Nancy/Jonathan, mostly Nancy-centric.

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Winter lasts well into March of 1984, clinging to the roads and trees and houses, lingering in the air.

Nancy Wheeler watches a bird alight on the telephone wires outside her house. The sky is a deep blue dome overhead, the sun nearly buried beneath the snow. The bird flitters right, darts left. Then it spreads its wings. Its black shape is suspended, for a breathless moment, in dying light. Without a goodbye, it disappears into the night.

Nancy shivers. Perhaps spring won't come at all, this year.

The dinners begin almost on accident. Nancy and Steve happen to be driving down the interstate at dusk and she sees the house all lit up, glowing like a warm and open face.

"Let's stop," she says.

She's not thinking.

Steve looks like he's going to contradict her. A thin layer of wet snow slides around on the windshield; it's terrible weather for spontaneity. But her face must reflect the thumping of her heart in her chest, because he flips on the blinker, and the car pulls deftly up the hill.

The Hollands' house is a one-story farmhouse, set up on a hill with a magnificent view of I-69. Nothing for miles but trees and fields and a smattering of churches and barns in the distance.

Nancy hasn't been here since last summer. This time, no dogs announce their arrival. Barb's dad isn't anywhere to be seen, though his pick-up truck dozes in the gravel driveway. But the lights are on in the house, and Nancy makes herself get out of the car and walk up to the door, her heart in her throat.

"What are we going to say," Steve mutters under his breath.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, rocks back on his heels. Nancy knocks on the door and stares at its blank face. Steve keeps glancing at her.

Nancy holds her breath.

The door finally opens and Barb's mom blinks at them. Nancy really doesn't know what to say.

"Nancy—what a pleasant surprise." She looks at Steve and smiles, polite but withdrawn.

"We saw the lights were on," Nancy stammers. "We thought we'd stop by and say hello."

Barb's mom keeps smiling, but her eyebrows tilt together.

"Well— isn't that sweet of you," she says, and Nancy realizes Barb's mom is about to cry. Nancy bites her lip. They shouldn't have stopped. All they have to offer are half-smiles and the reminder that they are here when Barb is so obviously *not*.

But Barb's mom doesn't cry. Instead she says, "Are you hungry? I just made chicken and noodles. Barbara's favorite, you know."

Nancy glances at Steve. The corner of Steve's mouth turns down, the equivalent of a shrug.

"We'd love to," Nancy says.

She enters the house despite the knot twisting itself into her chest.

The first time Nancy visited the Hollands' house, she was twelve years old. Her mother drove her. "Well, this is quite rustic, isn't it?" she'd said with feigned cheer. Nancy's mother grew up in Cincinnati, and expected Hawkins to behave like a proper city, which it never did. Nancy didn't reply.

That day, Barb appeared from behind the house just as Nancy was

climbing out of the car. She was dressed in her dad's old flannel and some overalls and the first thing she said was, "Wanna go see the cows?" They were new friends, and she had no way of knowing that Nancy had been scared of cows since the fourth grade, when she turned the wrong corner at the county fair and found herself staring in the eyes of one of those huge beasts.

So when Barb asked, Nancy could only gape. Barb just laughed, as though Nancy was the crazy one. As though she wanted to say, *how can you live in Indiana and be afraid of cows?* But she'd marched Nancy right out to the fields, anyway, and left her safely perched on a wooden fence. Then Barb went up to the massive cows like they were as small and docile as the Wheeler's old dog.

The really scary thing is that a monster could take out Barbara Holland, who wasn't afraid of anything.

She wasn't afraid of farm animals, or of Mr. Phillips who taught ninth grade English, or of telling the truth, even if it meant losing friends. She wasn't popular or "beautiful" by the estimation of Hawkins high schoolers, but she was brave and intelligent and she plunged through every obstacle without hesitation. And now she's dead.

Nancy hears grisly rumors of what might have happened to Barb, rumors almost more unbelievable than what actually did happen, and she wants to stand up in the middle of school and scream her lungs hoarse. Everyone thinks Barb is just *missing* and nothing is ever resolved and no one understands that Barb's absence is a gaping hole in the fabric of the universe. People forget.

And Nancy's the crazy one, for not being able to move on.

"You want to have dinner with them—regularly?" Steve asks.

Nancy nods. "I think it's the right thing to do."

Steve's fingers drum against the steering wheel.

"Nancy," he says very softly, and her heart skips a beat. She wants to kiss him. If she kisses him then he's likely to do whatever she asks,

and forget that anything was ever wrong. Her fingers curl into the sleeve of his jacket.

"Nancy," he says again. "We need to— *you* need to try to be normal."

Her hand freezes. "I am normal."

"I know. That's not—" he sighs, and rubs a hand over his face. "What I mean is, we went through some terrible shit in the fall, and I want to help you but I can't—I don't think it's healthy for you to wallow in it, okay?"

Nancy blinks. "I'm not wallowing in anything."

"Nancy."

He's looking at her. Nancy thumbs the soft edge of his jacket.

She wants to *tell him* —that Barbara is dead and she wouldn't be dead if Nancy hadn't been up in Steve's bedroom that night, if she'd just *listened* to Barb then Barb would still be alive, that Barb died in a horrible place that floods Nancy's nightmares—that all she can do is try to comfort Barb's parents because she *can't bring Barb back* —

"Forget it," Steve says, very gently. He takes her hand into his.

Nancy pulls her hand away. "I want to go home," she says.

He drives her home. Nancy doesn't kiss him goodbye.

The days blur together, more or less. The snow melts into muddy sludge. The ice softens to cold rain. Nancy goes to school, and she goes home, and she goes to Steve's basketball games and screams his name into the crowd, only to slip into his bedroom afterwards and breathe his name into his ear. It's almost like being happy. It is, without a doubt, normal.

At school, Steve has friends, and therefore Nancy has friends. By some fashion, Nancy Wheeler has become one of the popular girls. What would Barb say, if she could see her like this?

Stacy Davis used to call Nancy a prude and a suck-up, and now she passes Nancy notes during class, making plans for the weekend. Lauren Fessler asks Nancy for sex advice because she's never seen Steve Harrington so "satisfied." Alice Jones sits with her in study hall and replaces Barb as Nancy's partner in making good grades.

Oh, what would it matter, what Barb would say?

Nancy tries not to think about it. She tries to partition it off, setting aside her time at the Hollands' for thinking about Barbara, and everywhere else for being normal, like Steve asked.

Nancy wants to be normal. She tries.

At the end of March Steve has three away games in a row and Nancy doesn't see him for a week except at school, and she says as much to Stacy, who just stares her down in the bathroom mirror.

"Oh, god, he's *not worth it*. " Stacy coats her bottom lip with a thick red sheen. Her eyes flick back up to meet Nancy's in the mirror. "I know Steve Harrington is a lot of man for a high school boy, but—come on, Nancy. These are supposed to be the best years of your life."

Nancy muses over the flakes of mascara smudging underneath her eyes, and tries to think of what to say. "These *are* the best years of my life," she tries.

For some reason she thinks of that place , right then in the bathroom of Hawkins High School, like it has anything to do with—any of this. The dark loom of decaying trees. The stench of ash. The deep, unbearable silence.

"Nancy, are you going to marry Steve Harrington?" Stacy asks, somewhere far, far away.

Nancy's knuckles turn white against the porcelain sink. Barb *died* there, in that place. And here is Nancy, on the other side. Still living.

"I don't know," Nancy hears herself say.

In April, Nancy offers to bring dinner to the Hollands' house, even

though she's never cooked a dinner in her life. She finds her grandma's beef casserole recipe in a yellowed three-ring binder tucked behind her mother's sleek copy of *The Good HouseKeeping Illustrated Cookbook*. Nancy's grandma died when she was eleven. It's strange, that Holly will never know Grandma, not like Nancy and Mike did. It's strange how someone can be here on this earth, and then just gone, their absence slowly filled up by the messy business of living.

Nancy spends over an hour in the grocery store. She's never bought ground beef before, and going up to the counter makes her inexplicably nervous. *I fought a monster*, she thinks. *I shot it and set it on fire. I can make a damn casserole*. But under the bright fluorescent lights she is sixteen and alone and trying very hard to pretend she knows what the hell she's doing.

At home, the recipe seems even more mysterious. She's attempting to mince onions when her mother walks in and stands in the middle of the kitchen.

"Nancy," her mother says, emphasizing each syllable. "Do you—want help?"

Nancy dries her eyes on her shoulder. She looks up at her mother, meeting her gaze.

Nancy didn't cry when Jonathan pulled her out of Hell and she didn't cry when she sliced open her own hand and she didn't even cry when Steve's friends painted *Nancy Wheeler is a slut* all over town and he just stood there watching, and she's not going to cry now. The celery and carrots and cans of tomatoes all stand at attention, waiting to see what she'll do next.

"Yes," Nancy says in a small voice.

She doesn't cry.

Her mother takes over the mincing. Nancy stirs ingredients into the pot.

The casserole is decent. Barbara's mother offers to cook the next

meal, anyway. Nancy tries not to let her relief show on her face. Steve eats everything like he's a soldier attending to his duties, and Nancy is grateful. She grasps his hand under the table and lets the warmth of his skin soak into her bones. If nothing else, she's grateful for him being here with her. She's not sure she could do any of this alone.

By the end of April, winter surrenders to spring. The temperature rises defiantly. Nancy folds up her sweaters and stockings. *There are no monsters in warm weather*, she says to herself, though she has no idea whether or not it's true. A year ago, she didn't believe in monsters at all.

Jonathan Byers sits two rows behind Nancy and one row to the right in English class, next to the window. Every day he finishes his sentence diagrams before anyone else and hides his face in a book. Nancy is good with grammar, but not quite as good as him, and every day after she turns in her own worksheet she sneaks a glance at the sample of literature Jonathan is plowing through. Since February, he's worked his way through John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and now he sits with Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, the same captivated glaze over his eyes that Mike gets when reading comic books. In February he'd been reading *A Farewell to Arms* and Nancy had picked it up in the library, without really knowing why. She found it impenetrable and returned it unfinished, shaken a little by something in the text.

She's staring at the cover, and he looks up. Nancy means to look away but she holds his gaze, in spite of herself. His lips twist in what might be a smile. She returns the almost-smile.

Then she sits down at her desk. Time slips forward. She wonders if Jonathan thinks about her.

She wonders if Will is okay.

When the bells ring he brushes past her and his elbow grazes her arm. For a moment all sound dies and her focus zeroes in on that

point of contact, his jacket against her bare arm.

Sometimes she wakes up at night with *Jonathan* on her lips and a scream caught in her throat. She dreams that he does or doesn't pull her out of that other place; sometimes she's swallowed up in its Hellish bowels and sometimes she is safe in Jonathan Byers' arms. These are strange dreams that leave her sweaty and unsettled, and she has never told anyone how often she dreams of that other place.

"Jonathan," she says.

He looks at her with wide, bright deer-eyes. She swallows.

"What are you reading?"

His eyes are blank. She gestures to the book at the top of the stack in his arms.

"Oh." He looks at the book and then he looks at her. "It's about a Hasidic Jewish kid. Who wants to be an artist."

"Oh," Nancy returns.

"It's good," he manages. "Books sound kind of stupid if you don't—I mean. It's good."

A blush creeps up his neck. His gaze lands somewhere around Nancy's shoes. She's pretty sure he was going to say "if you don't read them," but thought the better of it.

"What made you choose that book?" she asks. She doesn't know what else to say.

He shrugs. "A weird kid who doesn't fit his community's expectations of him? Sounds like a good read to me."

He cracks a smile. Nancy hugs her books to her chest.

For a moment, they are quiet. She thinks about driving around town in Jonathan's car, the radio soft in the background, his eyes on the road. She thinks about the pads of his fingertips dragging across her palm. It's innocent. But she shouldn't be thinking like this.

"Well," she says finally. "I—hope it's good."

"Thanks," he says, too quickly.

She wonders about Will again. Mike talks less, these days, and when he does talk, he's usually angry. She remembers the hollow, desperate look in Jonathan's eyes when Will was missing, and they were hunting the monster. Jonathan would have gone to the ends of the earth to bring Will home. Nancy, on the other hand, had run from that other place as quickly as possible.

Eleventh graders in the next period start filtering into the room, their eyes darting over, curious.

"I should go," Nancy says.

"Me too," Jonathan says.

She leaves the classroom a half-step behind him. Steve is waiting by her locker and he nods at Jonathan, as though he's doing a duty. Nancy slows her steps to watch what Jonathan will do. He gives Steve a slight wave—more like a jerk of his hand—and disappears down the hall.

"Still friends with the nerd, huh?" Steve asks with a smile.

It's meant to be funny, to lighten the mood. He doesn't mean anything by it, and Nancy knows this.

"Yes," she replies. Her voice is clipped. Steve notices.

They don't talk about it.

Steve drives too fast to Barb's house (and it's still *Barb's house*, even now), only slowing when he spies a cop waiting in the grassy median where the interstate splits. He drives like he's got something to prove. Nancy doesn't say anything. It's becoming a pattern with them, not talking when the air gets too thick with the things they are trying to ignore.

Starting with: there was a real monster, the kind kids told stories

about at summer camp. Nancy used to be afraid to leave her bunk to go to the bathroom because she thought an alien would grab her in the dark. Barb was the one who pushed her out of bed, insisting *monsters aren't real, Nancy Wheeler*. Barb is the one who is dead.

They stop in the Hollands' gravel driveway. When the engine turns off, silence floods the car. The only light comes from the rich red streaks of sunset across the interstate, and the porch lamp that the Hollands never turn off.

"Nancy," Steve starts. And stops. He pushes a hand through his hair. "I just—I just don't know what I'm supposed to *do*."

Nancy's mood snaps from irritated to ashamed. Steve Harrington is a good guy—almost a man. He loves her. She knows he loves her. He is trying. Most people don't get that much in life.

Nancy looks out the windshield at the porch light and the wide face of the Hollands' door. "What is there to do?" she asks softly.

Steve keeps looking at her, like he's waiting for her to say something. But he can't fix this. Sometimes she hates him, because he can't fix this.

She's a real bitch, that Nancy Wheeler, she thinks. After a while, she gets out of the car. Neither of them can fix this.

Summer arrives. School ends. Steve takes full-time hours as a manager at his father's factory.

Nancy goes out with Stacy and Lauren and Alice during the day, lingering around their oversized houses and driving an hour out to the nearest decent mall. At night, Steve drives them to their friends' bonfires and Nancy drinks too many cans of beer, sighing with relief when Steve takes her in his arms, and drives her home.

Sometimes, she swears that she is living exactly the life she always wanted. Sometimes, she forgets.

When Stacy insists on going to the city pool, Nancy feigns illness, and

lies on her bed. Maybe she really is sick. Who knows.

In the evening she gets up and pulls her rickety old bike from the back of the garage. The tires are flat and the gears slightly rusted, but it still works after she puts air in the tires, and she's got to get out. She can't be here anymore.

She wanders. The streets are surprisingly quiet, basking in the orange glow of dying daylight. She sweats even in her shorts and tank, but the breeze runs through her hair, almost pleasant. *No monsters in warm weather*, she tells herself. What made her think she believed in monsters at all?

She means to go back home, but she ends up outside of town, riding past trees and corn fields. The corn is only as tall as her waist, now, but it will grow taller than her. Every year, it is the same. Reliable, predictable, unchanging.

The woods appear or she decides to go to the woods; she doesn't know which happens first. They don't look dangerous, not in summer dusk.

Nancy gets off her bike and leans it against a tree. The tree is normal and whole, without a sign of decay. All the other trees are the same. She touches each one, running her scarred palm along the mossy growths and rough bark. When she was little, she believed there were fairies in these woods. Little creatures like Tinkerbell, building houses out of moss and leaves. She believed that if she just wished hard enough, the fairies would come find her and take her into their homes and she would get to live there as long as she wanted, drinking dew drops and sharing secrets with flowers.

She finds the tree where she had gone through . It is easy enough to find, because it is dead, rotting where it stands. There is nothing extraordinary about it except that it is dead. There are no fairies in the forest. There are no pathways into Hell, either.

Nancy sinks to the forest floor and gives a dry half-sob. She wishes she could cry. She wishes she could reach into the past and undo all she did wrong.

Jonathan Byers' house sits on one of the side roads back into Hawkins, halfway between the woods and the city. Nancy knows how to get there although she has never intentionally tried to find it before. She pedals there in the same way she had pedaled to the woods: without thinking.

The lights are on. She can make out the shape of people inside the windows, probably watching television. Everything is back to normal. It is as though nothing ever happened at all.

She considers going up to the door. Knocking and pretending to be normal when Mrs. Byers opens the door. Asking if Jonathan is home. Following her into the house, past the scorched shape on the floor of the hallway where they had tried to kill the monster, back to his bedroom. He will be reading. He will look up with shock written across his face, and Mrs. Byers will leave the door cracked when she leaves. "Do you dream about it?" Nancy will ask, and Jonathan will understand why she's there, what she's asking, why she needs him when the world keeps spinning too fast under her feet.

In the end, she turns her bike around and leaves. Jonathan cannot help her. Jonathan cannot bring Barb back. No one can.

When she gets home, the sky is nearly dark. Fireflies dart across the lawn, flashes of yellow in the dusky green of summer. The grass has been recently cut and Nancy drops her bike onto the lawn, kicks off her shoes, and walks around to the back of the house. Behind their neighborhood stretches a wide field, soybeans this year. Across the acres twinkles a flood of fireflies, winking out as the stars appear above.

Nancy catches one in her palm. It walks across her scar, lifting its wings, pulsing warm light in her hand. Her hair sticks to her neck. The air is still and hot. The firefly lifts its wings and disappears into the night.

Nancy stands there in the dark, breathing deeply.

It is like this. She goes on living.

end.